Harold H. Haskin, 87, a blue-collar academic

BY ANDY NETZEL
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Harold Haley Haskin was a blue-collar guy.

A blue-collar guy who earned his doctorate at Harvard University, was a prestigious professor at Rutgers University and had a research laboratory named after him.

"A lot of times, when you get academics, they tend not to think very highly of people who do practical work," his longtime colleague, Susan Ford said. "One of the most valuable things he taught me was not to be an ivory tower type of scientist."

Mr. Haskin, who died Sunday at his Cape May Court House summer home at age 87, devoted most of his life to studying oysters and clams.

Even though Mr. Haskin achieved significant intellectual accomplishments and had a group of graduate assistants helping him in his research, he refused to let others do the grunt work for him, Ford said. A luminary part of researching oysters was transferring the traps from the ships to the labs and back again.

"A tray of fully grown oysters probably weighed close to 100 pounds," Ford said. "I always thought there was a competition between him and his male graduate students to see who could carry the most. He'd stick a tray on each shoulder to carry them."

That hard work ethic earned him respect.

"He would never ask anyone to do something he wasn't able to do himself," Ford said. "He was someone who had the trust of people at all levels from the governor to fishermen and oystermen."

Mr. Haskin was adopted and raised by Frederick Haskin after his parents died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. His family did not have a strong educational background. They were mostly farmers in South Jersey. His adopted father was a pipe-fitter.

But Mr. Haskin wanted to pursue higher education, so after he graduated from high school he got a job in a glasshouse or glass factory to pay his way through Rutgers.

Walter Cismoler, a student of Mr. Haskin's and later a colleague, said Mr. Haskin had to work the education he had to work in the conditions he did.

"As a kid he worked up in the glasshouses as a charger," he said. "During those days they charged the glasshouses by loading sand in right up to the face of the fire and dumping it in. And that's how he got the money to go to college."

Mr. Haskin eventually became a professor of zoology at Rutgers and lived in Piscataway.

Cismoler said Mr. Haskin was a very challenging teacher, one who would take students out in the field for a 20-hour day of back-breaking labor and research. Those who didn't drop the classes ended up being great scientists, he said.

Though Mr. Haskin preferred to spend his time in the field, Ford said, he had an office that presented a navigational challenge.

"There were stacks of papers on his desk, boxes of folders on the floor, books in the bookshelves," she said. "Sometimes it was very difficult to move around in there. I don't think he threw anything away. Ever, and of course people were always sending him things."

From old nominations he gave his students to half-used note tablets, he didn't throw away anything. It got so bad, Ford said, that when he needed a place to spread out and work, he went home to use his dining room table.

Mr. Haskin never used a computer. He didn't like them. He didn't even like typewriters, Ford said. He wrote everything longhand and would have his wife or a secretary type it for him.

His wife, Peg Haskin, remembers a softer side of her husband than the tough "Hurricane Hal" his colleagues described.

"We were married for 60 years and he was a great husband and father," she said. "We had a good family. We always read to our children at bedtime. That's one thing I remember about him — him reading to the kids."

In addition to his wife, Mr. Haskin is survived by his five children, Kathleen Haskin of New York City, Jean Haskin of North Kingstown, R.I., Elizabeth Haskin of Cape May Court House, Frederick James Haskin of Piscataway, and Mary D. Haskin of Washington, D.C. Contributions can be made to the Harold Haskin Fisherman's Fund or to the Harold H. Haskin Memorial Scholarship Fund, Rutgers University Foundation, 7 College Ave., New Brunswick, N.J. 08901.

A memorial service will be held